

Clear Skies for Southern Oregon

Remarks Prepared for Delivery

By Representative Greg Walden (OR-02)

Jackson County Chamber Forum

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Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me to share some comments with you today.

I want to thank Brad Hicks and his team at the Chamber.

I would especially like to thank **Rich** and **Sam** with Hunter Communications for sponsoring today's forum and for inviting me to speak today.

Sam, as you know, we still have a lot of work to do to expand broadband into rural communities, but we've made significant progress to connect communities in underserved communities in Oregon. With the passage of the RAY BAUM'S Act last year, we reauthorized the FCC for the first time in more than two decades, which will help us make even more progress in bridging the digital divide.

This legislation came through the Energy and Commerce Committee under my leadership before becoming law in the last Congress, and it was bipartisan like much of the work we got done at the Energy and Commerce Committee. In fact, 93% of the 148 Energy and Commerce bills that passed the House in the last Congress were bipartisan. That includes legislation to combat the opioid crisis which is now law – the SUPPORT for Patients and Communities Act – was crafted with the input of people on the front lines of the opioid crisis in Oregon, which I received from roundtables across our district. This law will help advance treatment and recovery initiatives, improve prevention, protect our communities, and bolster our efforts to fight deadly illicit drugs like fentanyl. The bipartisan law represents the largest Congressional effort in history to combat a single drug crisis.

While we've made significant progress on key issues for our state and country, there's more work to be done to address serious problems we face here in Oregon.

There is perhaps no challenge that we face in southern Oregon that is greater than the threat of wildfires. I've been proud to work alongside the Chamber's Natural Resources Committee as we tackle this challenge. Every summer, wildfires burn up our federal forests, choke our citizens in southern Oregon with smoke and pollute our atmosphere with particulate matter.

What is the impact of this smoke? By last July, Jackson County had the worst air quality in the country. And by August, only Beijing had worse air quality than Medford.

More telling than numbers on an Air Quality Index map are the real impacts here on the ground. An analysis of the 2017 Oregon wildfire season estimates that 600 jobs were cut from the leisure and hospitality business in central Oregon and southern Oregon due to the decline in tourism caused by active wildfires and the smoke that comes with them.

According to a Travel Oregon report, the statewide tourism industry lost \$51.5 million in revenue in 2017 due to wildfires and smoke. Approximately \$3 million of that loss was in Jackson County alone.

The iconic Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland canceled more than 26 outdoor performances because of wildfire smoke last year. That's more canceled shows than in all five previous seasons combined. These cancellations cost the Festival approximately \$2 million in 2018.

This year, they've said they won't hold outdoor performances in July and August and will use the high school instead. Roughly 1/3 of the capacity, and not exactly the experience people travel here to get from the Shakespeare Festival.

For our beloved southern Oregon wineries, wildfire smoke tainted their grapes and the wine that comes from them. This caused regional growers to lose a \$4 million contract with a California winery, who said, and I quote, "due to the failure of your grapes to pass our wine sensory evaluation for the presence of 'smoke taint' characters, the winery is hereby rejecting all of the grapes from your vineyard for the 2018 harvest year."

Wildfire smoke completely shuttered the doors of a local small business in Ashland. The Ashland Outdoor Store was forced to close after 25 years in business in southern Oregon. When asked about the closure, the small business owner of the Ashland Outdoor Store said, "When there's so much smoke, no one wants to be outside, so no one buys outdoor gear."

No one wants to be outside during the summer months in southern Oregon any more because of the smoke from wildfires, and for good reason. This smoke poses a serious threat to our health.

According to EPA research, premature deaths tied to wildfire air pollution were as high as 2,500 per year. Other research out of Colorado State University suggests that number could be much higher – 25,000 per year.

In Congress, I held hearings to examine the impact of wildfire smoke on our communities. A man from Eagle Point sent me the air filter from his C-PAP machine to illustrate how omnipresent wildfire smoke is during the summer months in southern Oregon. After just two days of use *inside his home* in Eagle Point, the C-PAP filter, which is supposed to be a stark white, was turned black by wildfire smoke. This is the filter that allows people suffering from sleep apnea to breathe during the night, and it looked like the inside of a chimney.

Wildfire smoke has trapped people in their homes, setting off the smoke alarms in their own living rooms even with the windows closed. Wildfire smoke has closed our schools, forcing our school sports teams to practice indoors. Wildfire smoke has crept into every... single... aspect of our lives here in southern Oregon.

Enough is enough.

It's time to set a goal of Clear Skies for Southern Oregon.

It is time to change how federal forests are managed and how fires on federal forest lands are extinguished.

We cannot and SHOULD NOT tolerate choking smoke and devastated forests every summer.

We should not have to flee Oregon to find a place to breathe. We should not be treated as “smoke refugees” in our own land.

We need clear skies for southern Oregon, and we can accomplish that by commonsense changes to federal policy.

First, we need to acknowledge the fact that the problem is rooted in management of our federal forest lands more so than state forest lands. In 2017, 50% of wildfires started on lands protected by the U.S. Forest Service and 50% of wildfires started on lands protected by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

However, 95% of the acres burned from wildfires in 2017 in Oregon were on the federal forests managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Moreover, while just 4% of the land in Oregon is Wilderness where active forest management is prohibited by the federal government, 32% of the acres burned in 2017 and 2018 were from fires that started in Wilderness.

That's why reforming the way we manage our federal forests has been a top priority of mine in Congress. Last year, I worked to pass into law the most significant improvements to forest management in more than a decade. That included a fix to fire borrowing, which means in 2020 we will finally treat wildfires like the natural disasters that they are and stop robbing our forest management accounts to pay to fight wildfires.

During a hearing on wildfire smoke last year, I invited Senator Herman Baertschiger from Grants Pass to testify before my committee so he could educate my colleagues on the importance of forest management to reducing catastrophic wildfires. Senator Baertschiger testified that wildfires that strike in areas where burned timber from previous fires is not removed will change the entire ecosystem of the forest and destroy the forest's ability to naturally recover.

We are not alone in thinking that removing dead trees after a fire will help reduce the risk of future wildfires. California's Democrat Governor Gavin Newsom declared a national wildfire state of emergency two weeks ago that will allow state officials to bypass environmental regulations to clear dead trees ahead of the next wildfire season. Newsom said that the number of dead trees creates an extremely dangerous fire risk in California. Newsome said quote, "some of these projects quite literally, not figuratively, could take two years to get done, or we could get them done in the next two months."

As we know well in southern Oregon, it takes much longer than two years to breakthrough the litigation and roadblocks to complete needed forest management projects. And clearly Governor Newsom is worried that environmental gridlock will increase the risk of wildfires for the people of California with another wildfire season just on the horizon.

Unfortunately, our provision to expedite removal of the dead timber after a fire – like Governor Newsom is implementing – was ripped from the Farm Bill after it passed the House. Senate Democrats fought our efforts every step of the

way. This was a real missed opportunity to protect the health of our forests and our communities from the threat of wildfires. We must try again.

Studies from the Forest Service and Nature Conservancy state that active forest management can reduce the size and intensity of wildfires by 70% and the carbon emissions from wildfires by up to 85%. I had a retired forest service worker in Hood River tell me after a town hall a few weeks ago, that he'd read some 75% of carbon emissions occur after fires as the debris decays. One thing we know for sure is that in 2007 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found that forest management would have the longest sustained carbon mitigation benefit.

We're all hearing much about climate change, global warming, green new deal and more. As the top Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee, I'm using the attention this issue is getting to argue for federal forest management reforms. And I'm working to prove that there's a better way to address emissions than through taxation, over-regulation and eventual economic stagnation.

Instead, America should do what we've always done best, focus on innovation, conservation, adaptation and preparation. Our great discoveries have revolutionized energy production around the globe and created enormous wealth and jobs here at home.

The natural gas revolution not only lowered costs for consumers, but also lowered carbon emissions. A recent report by the International Energy Agency pointed out that despite a slight increase in 2018, U.S. emissions remain around their 1990 levels. And the U.S. has experienced the largest absolute decline in emissions since 2000. That's better than any other country on the planet. A large portion of this has been due to fuel switching from coal to natural gas. Last year alone, 16 gigawatts of coal power went off line. We need to do more to get our natural gas into world markets, creating jobs and revenues here while reducing pollution around the world.

Hydropower is important for us in Oregon, generating 40% of the electricity in our state. I helped change the law to expedite the development of closed loop, pumped storage hydropower and simplify approval processes for small hydro projects like those irrigators can put into their systems. One such pumped storage project – called Swan Lake – is in the planning process near Klamath Falls. Backers say it would generate clean energy to power up to 390,000 homes.

There are also efforts underway to make the vast supply of wind and solar power in our state more reliable for Oregon's power grid. One project in Morrow County, called the Wheatridge Renewable Energy Facility, is a first-of-its-kind battery storage project that combines wind and solar energy with one of the largest battery storage facilities in the country. Not long after he became Secretary of Energy, I asked Rick Perry to come to our district and see how unique our power sector is. We toured McNary Dam on the mighty Columbia River and got a briefing at the Pacific Northwest National Lab on large scale battery development.

To further tap into nuclear energy, which leaders like Bill Gates and former Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz say is essential to reducing our carbon emissions, an Oregon company called NuScale is developing the first small-scale, modular nuclear power technology that is about the size of a rail car. In fact, the National Lab in Idaho is in discussions with a company in Utah to use this technology to transition away from coal and toward cleaner energy sources like nuclear. Nuclear is baseload, emissions-free, and new nuclear energy technology like that being developed by NuScale is making this energy source safer and more efficient to use. I helped lead the effort in Congress to spur development and approval of this new type of nuclear energy that can provide emissions-free, base load power.

And right here in the Rogue Valley, Stephen Gambie and his team at Rogue Disposal have been leading on renewable energy efforts with their biogas to energy project out at the landfill, which is already providing power for more than 3,000 homes in the area. They are working to turn that into renewable natural gas to power the very garbage trucks that pick up the trash at your home.

So Oregon is leading the way with innovative solutions for hydropower generation, grid-scale battery storage, nuclear energy, and even using the gas produced by landfills to power our communities. We should also be leading the way in modern forest management practices that will help reduce the carbon emissions from catastrophic wildfires and protect our air sheds, water sheds, and forests.

Most importantly, reforming federal forest policy will help us protect our communities. Reforming federal forest policy will reduce the threat of wildfire smoke that chokes our skies, holds people hostage in their homes, drives tourism away from southern Oregon, shuts the doors of small businesses, and rips jobs

away from people right here in Jackson County. In short – reforming federal forest policy will help bring clear skies back to southern Oregon.

I am committed to doing whatever it takes to make that happen and I look forward to working alongside all of you here to achieve this goal. So thank you again and I'm happy to take a few questions.